

VZCZCXRO2687
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK RUEHMOS
DE RUEHGB #1012/01 0861243
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 271243Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3578
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001012

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2026

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#)

SUBJECT: CAMPAIGNING IN SOUTHERN IRAQ: DIRTY TRICKS,
DEPLETED COFFERS, AND DEALS WITH THE DEVIL

REF: A. A. (A) 05 BAGHDAD 4958

[1](#)B. B. (B) 05 BAGHDAD 5003

[1](#)C. C. (C) 05 BAGHDAD 4906

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Ford,
reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary. The number one candidate in Muthanna province for the National Peace List (#635, Laith Kubba's party), Talib Aziz al-Hamdani, acknowledged that his party made strategic mistakes, and that they got fewer than 5,000 votes nationwide, but said that they were also the victim of a campaign of dirty tricks orchestrated by the United Iraqi Coalition (UIC, list 555). He said he spent USD 18,000 of his own funds on his campaign in Muthanna, and his party received about a hundred votes there. He hired his bodyguards from the Jaysh al-Mahdi, and found them grateful to be earning four times what they received as militia members. Prospects for independent Islamist candidates in the South look limited at present unless they compromise their principles and join harder line Islamist parties or band together with other, like-minded independents and become as ruthless as their opponents -- hardly the choices we would like them to have. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) National Peace List (#635) candidate Talib Aziz al-Hamdani described to PolOff on March 24 the challenges of running on a small, independent party ticket in southern Iraq. Hamdani, who taught political science in California before returning to Iraq and working in civil society since 2003, ran as number one for his party in his home province of Muthanna (capital Samawa). Atop the party ticket in Baghdad was Laith Kubba, previously spokesman for Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari, and Hamdani's brother-in-law. The party performed poorly, winning (according to provisional numbers) 4,750 votes nationwide, and only a dismal 99 votes in Muthanna, Iraq's smallest province. In contrast, the United Iraqi Coalition (UIC, list 555) won about 176,000 votes in Muthanna. (Note: The IECI Web site does not list certified vote totals for the smaller parties. We will be raising this gap with them in our next meeting with them this week. End note.)

[1](#)3. (S) Hamdani admitted that his party had made mistakes in their campaign strategy. They had wanted to run as independents because they did not agree with the Islamist Shia agenda of the List 555. However, Kubba, their most visible candidate, did not cease being PM Jafari's spokesman until too close to the election, denying them the opportunity to distinguish their program from Jafari's or the UIC's. Kubba was also insisting that all of his 635 candidates stick to positive messages, and not engage in negative campaigning against the UIC, Iraqiya (Ayad Allawi, list 731), the Kurds or other lists. While Hamdani praised

Kubba for recognizing that if 635 got any seats, it would have to join with other lists to try to form a government, Hamdani said it left them with no marketable message once the dirty tricks started.

Dirty Tricks

¶4. (S) During the last few days of the campaign, Hamdani said, the UIC pulled out the stops to undermine every other campaign that posed any possibility of a threat to their victory. For example, they spread rumors that Kubba, Ahmad Chalabi (on a separate list) and Hamdani himself had all withdrawn from the campaign and joined the 555 list. The beauty of this tactic, Hamdani said, is that it left 635's supporters comfortable voting for 555. It forced 635's candidates to spend precious time denying they had withdrawn, giving them less time to try to get out their message.

¶5. (S) Hamdani also said he had heard from a named female relative in Samawa that she had been visited by "religious men" campaigning for 555 who told her that if she did not vote for Sistani (sic), she would be forcibly divorced from her husband. The analogy was to an interpretation of Islamic law that allows a judge to divorce a Muslim spouse from a spouse who is an apostate, even if the couple does not wish to be divorced. (Note: Recent court cases in Afghanistan and Egypt show that some Islamic jurists still uphold this interpretation. End note.) Hamdani said his well-educated female relative knew this was an absurd notion in the context of a vote in the Iraqi election, but Hamdani said that simple, uneducated people might not have known better. Women, in particular, were susceptible to

BAGHDAD 00001012 002 OF 002

this campaign dirty trick, Hamdani said, because a divorce on grounds of apostasy would prevent the woman from returning to her family, leaving her an outcast, if she survived at all.

Depleted Coffers

¶6. (S) Hamdani said that he spent USD 18,000 of his own funds to campaign in Samawa. (Note: USD 180 per vote. End note.) His party had more to spend than most independent parties in Muthanna, the smallest and one of the poorest provinces in all Iraq. His party as a whole had very little money, and most of that was spent in Baghdad. In contrast, the Shia Coalition spent far more lavishly in Muthanna, though Hamdani did not want to speculate how much.

Deals with the Devil

¶7. (S) Practical aspects of campaigning in Muthanna gave rise to activities that Hamdani said would probably be looked at differently in Baghdad or the United States. His personal security was one such issue. To hire bodyguards, Hamdani went to the local Jaysh al-Mahdi commander. He asked for five of their best men. When the men were produced, he offered them USD 200 a month instead of the USD 50 a month they were otherwise getting. They were very simple men, and gave honorable service. As a candidate, Hamdani had good Islamist credentials, which helped, he said. He regards himself as having good contacts among Muqtada al-Sadr supporters.

¶8. (C) Hamdani found running for office an extremely encouraging experience despite his party's poor performance. He enjoyed the personal aspect of

campaigning. When asked whether he planned to run for office in four years, Hamdani said with a smile it was too early to say, then cited Richard Nixon as a role model of a leader who rose from the ashes of a political defeat in 1962 to become President of the United States.

Comment

19. (S) Learning democratic norms and standards of campaign fair play would not be simple in any new democracy. Thus, it is not surprising that the December 2005 election campaign was a rough-and-tumble affair, with the UIC being cited as perhaps the roughest (Refs A, B and C). Even in their wildest dreams, the National Peace List could not have won more than one or two seats. If none of the dirty tricks had been perpetrated against them, they still would likely have won no seats. For the UIC to have felt the need to target small parties like the National Peace List shows an anti-democratic streak that is consistent with reports of assassinations of Allawi candidates and campaign workers (Ref B), for which, to our knowledge, no responsible criminals have yet been identified, let alone prosecuted. This impunity has consequences for the prospects for democracy in Iraq. Independent democratic Islamist voices like Hamdani face unenviable choices: (a) stay in politics with little prospect of doing better in the next election, (b) compromise their principles to join the more hard-line Islamist parties, (c) drop out in the face of their better-funded, more ruthless opponents, or (d) band together with other, like-minded independents and become as ruthless as their opponents. These are all tough choices. End comment.
KHALILZAD